Directions how to hear SERMONS.

A

SERMON

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Take Heed therefore how you Hear.

THE Occaſion of our Lord's giving this Caution was this --- Perceiving that much People were gathered together to hear him out of every City, and knowing (for he is GOD and knoweth all Things) that many, if not moſt of them, would be Hearers only, and not Doers of the Word, He ſpake to them by a Parable, wherein, under the Similitude of a Sower that went out to ſow his Seed, He plainly intimated how few there were amongſt them, who could receive any ſaving Benefit from his Doctrine, or bring forth Fruit unto Perfection.

The Application one would imagine ſhould be plain and obvious: But the Diſciples, as yet unenlightened in any great Degree by the Holy Spirit, and therefore unable to ſee into the hidden Myſteries of the Kingdom of GOD, dealt with our Saviour, as People ought to deal with their Miniſters ---- diſcourſed with him privately about the Mean-

ing of what he had taught them in Publick, and, with a ſincere Deſire of doing their Duty, aſked for an Interpretation of the Parable.

Our Bleſſed Lord, as he always was willing to inſtruct thoſe that were teachable, (herein ſetting his Miniſters an Example to be courteous and eaſy of Acceſs,) freely told them the Signification of it. And withal, to make them more cautious and more attentive to his Doctrine for the future, He tells them, that they were in an eſpecial Manner to be the Light of the World, and were to proclaim on the Houſe-Top, whatſoever he told them in Secret. And as their improving the Knowledge already imparted, was the only Condition upon which more was to be given them, it therefore highly concern'd them to take Heed how they heard.

From the Context then it appears that the Words were primarily ſpoken to the Apoſtles themſelves. But becauſe they were the Repreſentatives of the whole Church, and 'tis to be fear'd out of thoſe many Thouſands that flock to hear Sermons, but few, comparatively ſpeaking, are effectually influenced by them; I cannot but think it very neceſſary to remind you of the Caution given by our Lord to his Diſciples, and to exhort you with the utmoſt Earneſtneſs, to *take Heed how you Hear.*

In

In Proſecution of which Deſign I ſhall in the following Diſcourſe,

Firſt, Prove that every one ought to take all Opportunities of hearing Sermons. And, *Secondly*, I ſhall lay down ſome Cautions and Directions, in order to your hearing them with Profit and Advantage.

And, *Firſt*, I am to prove that every one ought to take Opportunities of hearing Sermons.

That there have always been particular Perſons ſet apart by GOD, to inſtruct and exhort his People, to practiſe what He ſhould require of them, is evident from many Paſſages of Scripture.---St. *Jude* tells us, that *Enoch*, the Seventh from *Adam*, propheſied, or preached, concerning the Lord's coming with Ten Thouſand of his Saints to Judgment. And *Noah*, who lived not long after, is ſtiled by St. *Peter*, *A Preacher of Righteouſneſs*. And though in all the intermediate Space between the Flood and Giving of the Law, we hear but of few Preachers, yet we may reaſonably conclude, that GOD never left himſelf without Witneſs, but at ſundry Times, and after divers Manners ſpoke to our Fathers by the Patriarchs and Prophets.

But however it was before, we are aſſured that after the Delivery of the Law, GOD

has conſtantly ſeparated to himſelf a certain Order of Men to preach to, as well as pray for his People; and commanded them to enquire their Duty at the Prieſts Mouths. And though the *Jews* were frequently led into Captivity, and for their Sin ſcattered abroad through the Face of the Earth, yet, he never utterly forſook his Church, but ſtill kept up a Remnant of Prophets and Preachers, as *Ezekiel*, *Jeremiah*, *Daniel* and others, to reprove, inſtruct, and call them to Repentance.

Thus was it under the Law. Nor has the Church been worſe, but infinitely better provided for under the Goſpel:---For when JESUS CHRIST, that great High Prieſt, had through the Eternal Spirit offer'd himſelf as a full, perfect, ſufficient Sacrifice, Oblation and Satisfaction for the Sins of the whole World, and after his Reſurrection had all Power committed to him, both in Heaven and Earth, He gave Commiſſion to his Apoſtles, and in them to all ſucceeding Miniſters, to go and preach his Goſpel to every Creature; promiſing to be with them, to guide, aſſiſt, ſtrengthen and comfort them " always, even to the End of the World.

But if it be the Duty of Miniſters to preach (and woe be to them if they do not preach the Goſpel, for a Neceſſity is laid upon them) no doubt, the People are obliged to attend to them;

them; for otherwiſe, wherefore are Miniſters ſent?

And how can we here avoid admiring the Love and tender Care which our dear Redeemer has expreſſed for his Spouſe the Church? Who, becauſe He could not be always with us in Perſon, on account it was expedient He ſhould go away, and as our Forerunner take Poſſeſſion of that Glory he had purchaſed by his precious Blood, yet would not leave us comfortleſs, but firſt ſettled a ſufficient Number of Paſtors and Teachers; and afterwards, according to his Promiſe, actually did and will continue to ſend down the Holy Ghoſt to furniſh them and their Succeſſors with proper Gifts and Graces for the Work of the Miniſtry, for the perfecting of the Saints, for the edifying of his Body in Love, 'till we all come in the Unity of the Spirit, to the Fullneſs of the Meaſure of the Stature of CHRIST.

Oh! how inſenſible are thoſe of this unſpeakable Gift, who do deſpite to the Spirit of Grace, who crucify the Son of GOD afreſh, and put him to an open Shame, by wilfully refuſing to attend on ſo great a Means of their Salvation? How dreadful will the End of ſuch Men be? How aggravating, that Light ſhould come into the World, that the glad Tidings of Salvation ſhould be ſo very frequently in this populous City, and that ſo many ſhould

loath this ſpiritual Manna, this Angels Food, and call it light Bread? How much more tolerable will it be for *Tyre* and *Sidon*, for *Sodom* and *Gomorrah*, than for ſuch Sinners? For better Men had never heard of a Saviour being born, than after they have heard, not to give Heed to the Miniſtry of thoſe, who are employed as his Ambaſſadors, to tranſact Affairs between GOD and their Souls.

We may, though at a Diſtance, without a Spirit of Propheſy, foretell the deplorable Condition of ſuch Men; and behold them caſt into Hell, lifting up their Eyes, being in Torment, and crying out, How often would our Miniſters have gathered us, as a Hen gathereth her Chickens under her Wings? ----But we would not.---Oh, that we had known in that our Day, the Things that belonged to our everlaſting Peace!---But now they are for ever hid from our Eyes.

Thus wretched, thus inconceivably miſerable, will ſuch be as ſlight and make a Mock at the publick Preaching of the Goſpel.---- But taking it for granted, there are but few, if any, of this unhappy Stamp, who think it worth their while to tread the Courts of the Lord's Houſe; I paſs on now to the

Second general Thing propoſed,----To lay down ſome Cautions and Directions, in order to

to your hearing Sermons with Profit and Advantage.

And here, if we reflect on what has been already delivered, and conſider that Preaching is an Ordinance of GOD, a Means appointed by JESUS CHRIST himſelf for promoting his Kingdom amongſt Men, you cannot reaſonably be offended, if, in order that you may hear Sermons with Profit and Advantage, I

Firſt, direct or intreat you to come to hear them, not out of Curioſity, but from a ſincere Deſire to know and do your Duty.

Formality and Hypocriſy in any religious Exerciſe, is an Abomination unto the LORD. And to enter his Houſe merely to have our Ears entertained, and not our Hearts reformed, muſt certainly be highly diſpleaſing to the Moſt High GOD, as well as unprofitable to ourſelves.

Hence it is that ſo many remain Unconverted, yea, Unaffected with the moſt Evangelical Preaching; ſo that like St. *Paul*'s Companions, they only hear the Preacher's Voice with their outward Ears, but do not experience the Power of it inwardly in their Hearts. Or like the Ground near *Gideon*'s Fleece, they remain untouched; whilſt others that came to be fed with the ſincere Milk of the Word, like the Fleece itſelf, are watered by the Dew of GOD's Heavenly Bleſſing, and grow thereby.

Flee

Flee, therefore, my Brethren, flee Curioſity, and prepare your Hearts by a humble Diſpoſition to receive, with Meekneſs, the engrafted Word, and then it will be a Means, under GOD, to quicken, build up, purify, and ſave your Souls.

A ſecond Direction I ſhall lay down for the ſame Purpoſe, is, not only to prepare your Hearts before you hear, but alſo to give diligent Heed to the Things that are ſpoken, whilſt you are hearing the Word of GOD.

If an earthly King was to iſſue out a Royal Proclamation, on performing, or not performing the Conditions wherein contained the Life or Death of his Subjects entirely depended, how ſolicitous would they be to hear what thoſe Conditions were? And ſhall not we pay the ſame Reſpect to the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and lend an attentive Ear to his Ambaſſadors, when they are declaring, in his Name, on what Terms our Pardon, Peace, and Happineſs may be ſecured?

When GOD deſcended on Mount *Sinai* in terrible Majeſty, to give unto his People the Law, how attentive were they to his Servant *Moſes?* And if they were ſo earneſt to hear the Thundrings or Threatnings of the Law, ſhall not we be as ſolicitous to hear from the Miniſters of CHRIST, the Glad Tidings of the Goſpel?

Whilſt

Whilſt CHRIST was himſelf on Earth, it is ſaid, that the People hung upon him to hear the gracious Words that proceeded out of his Mouth. And if we look'd on Miniſters as we ought, as the Repreſentatives of JESUS CHRIST, we ſhould hang upon them to hear their Words alſo.

Beſides, the ſacred Truths that Goſpel Miniſters deliver, are not dry inſipid Lectures on Moral Philoſophy, intended only to amuſe us for a while; but the great Myſteries of Godlineſs, which, therefore, we are bound ſtudiouſly to liſten to, leſt through our Negligence, we ſhould either not underſtand them, or by any other Means let them ſlip.

But how regardleſs are thoſe of this Direction, who, inſtead of hanging on the Preacher to hear him, doze or ſleep whilſt he is ſpeaking to them from GOD? Unhappy Men! Can they not watch with our Bleſſed LORD one Hour? What? Have they never read how *Eutychus* fell down as he was ſleeping, when St. *Paul* continued his Diſcourſe 'till Midnight, and was taken up dead?

But to return. Though you may prepare your Hearts, as you may think, by a teachable Diſpoſition, and be attentive whilſt Diſcourſes are delivering, yet this will profit you little, unleſs you obſerve a

Third Direction----not to entertain any the leaſt Prejudice againſt the Miniſter.

For

For could a Preacher ſpeak with the Tongue of Men and Angels, if his Audience was prejudiced againſt him, he would be but as a ſounding Braſs, or a tinkling Cymbal.

That was the Reaſon why JESUS CHRIST himſelf, the Eternal Word, could not do many mighty Works, nor preach to any great Effect among thoſe of his own Country; for they were offended at him: And was this ſame Jeſus, this GOD Incarnate again to bow the Heavens, and to come down ſpeaking as never Man ſpake, yet, if we were prejudiced againſt him, as the *Jews* were, we ſhould harden our Hearts as the *Jews* did theirs.

Take heed, therefore, my Brethren, and beware of entertaining any Diſlike againſt thoſe whom the Holy Ghoſt has made Overſeers over you.---- Conſider that the Clergy are Men of like Paſſions with yourſelves.------ And though we ſhould even hear a Perſon teaching others to do, what he has not taught himſelf; yet, that is no ſufficient Reaſon for rejecting his Doctrine-----for Miniſters ſpeak not in their own, but CHRIST's Name. And we know who commanded the People to do whatſoever the *Scribes* and *Phariſees* ſhould ſay unto them, though they ſaid but did not.

But, *Fourthly*, as you ought not to be prejudiced againſt, ſo you ſhould be careful not to depend too much on a Preacher, or think

think more highly of him than you ought to think.

For though this be an Extream, that People ſeldom run into; yet prefering one Teacher, in Oppoſition to another, has often been of ill Conſequence to the Church of God.

That, we read, was a Fault which the great Apoſtle of the *Gentiles* condemned in the *Corinthians:* For whereas one ſaid, I am of *Paul*; another, I am of *Apollos:* Are ye not Carnal, ſays he? For who is *Paul*, and who is *Apollos*, but Inſtruments in God's Hands by whom you believed? And are not all Miniſters ſent forth to be miniſtring Ambaſſadors to thoſe who ſhall be Heirs of Salvation? And are they not all therefore greatly to be eſteemed for their Work's Sake?

The Apoſtle, 'tis true, commands us to pay double Honour to thoſe who labour in the Word and Doctrine. But then to prefer one Miniſter at the Expence of another (perhaps, to ſuch a Degree, as when you have actually entered a Church, to come out again becauſe he does not preach) is earthly, ſenſual, and deviliſh.

Not to mention that Popularity and Applauſe cannot but be exceeding dangerous, even to a rightly informed Mind; and muſt neceſſarily fill any thinking Man with a holy Jealouſy, leſt he ſhould take that Honour to himſelf, which is due only to God; who alone

qua-

qualifies him for his Miniſterial Labours, and from whom alone every good and perfect Gift cometh.

A *Fifth* Direction I would recommend is, to make a particular Application of every thing that is delivered to your own Hearts.

When our Saviour was diſcourſing at his laſt Supper with his beloved Diſciples, and foretold that one of them ſhould betray him, each of them immediately applied it to his own Heart, and ſaid, *Lord, is it I?* And would Perſons in like Manner, when Preachers are diſſuading from any Vice, or perſuading to any Virtue, inſtead of crying, this was deſign'd againſt ſuch and ſuch a one, turn their Thoughts inwardly, and ſay, Lord, is it I? how far more beneficial ſhould we find Diſcourſes to be, than they generally are now?

But we are apt to wander too much Abroad: Always looking at the Mote which is in our Neighbour's Eye, rather than the Beam which is in our own.

Haſte we now to the *Sixth* and laſt Direction: If you would receive a Bleſſing from the Lord, when you hear his Word preach'd, pray to him, both before, in, and after every Sermon, to endue the Miniſter with Power to ſpeak, and to grant you a Will and Ability to put in Practice, what he ſhall ſhew from the Book of God to be your Duty.

This

This would be an excellent Means to render the Word preach'd effectual to the Enlightening and Enflaming your Hearts, and without this, all the other Means before preſcribed will be in vain.

No doubt it was this Conſideration that made St. *Paul* ſo earneſtly intreat his Beloved *Epheſians* to intercede with GOD for him---- *Praying always*, ſays he, *with all Manner of Prayer and Supplication in the Spirit, and for Me alſo, that I may open my Mouth with Boldneſs, to make known the Myſteries of the Goſpel.* And if ſo great an Apoſtle as St. *Paul*, needed the Prayers of the People, much more do thoſe Miniſters, who have only the ordinary Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Beſides, this would be a good Proof that you ſincerely deſired to do as well as know the Will of GOD: And it muſt highly profit both Miniſters and People; becauſe GOD, through your Prayers, will give them a double Portion of his Holy Spirit, whereby they will be enabled to inſtruct you more fully in the Thing which pertain to the Kingdom of GOD.

And oh, that all that hear me this Day would ſeriouſly apply their Hearts to practiſe what has now been told them!----How would Miniſters ſee Satan, like Lightning, fall from Heaven, and People find the Word preach'd ſharper than a two-edg'd Sword, and mighty

mighty through GOD to the pulling down of the Devil's ſtrong Holds!

The Holy Ghoſt would then fall on all them that heard the Word; as when St. *Peter* preach'd. The Goſpel of CHRIST would have free Couſe, run very ſwiftly, and Thouſands again be converted by a Sermon.

For JESUS CHRIST is the ſame Yeſterday, To-day, and for ever. He has promiſed to be with his Miniſters always, even unto the End of the World. And the Reaſon why we do not receive larger Effuſions of the bleſſed Spirit of GOD, is not becauſe our Allpowerful Redeemer's Hand is ſhortned, but becauſe we are not prepared to receive them, and becauſe we do not expect them, but confine them to the Primitive Times.

It does indeed ſometimes happen that GOD, to magnify his Free Grace in CHRIST JESUS, is found of them that ſought him not; a notorious Sinner is forcibly work'd upon by a publick Sermon, and pluck'd as a Firebrand out of the Fire. But this is not GOD's ordinary way of acting. No, for the Generality, he only viſits thoſe with the Power of his Word, who humbly wait to know what he would have them to do. And ſends unqualified Hearers not only empty, but harden'd away.

Take Heed, therefore, ye careleſs, curious Profeſſors, if any ſuch be here preſent, how you

you hear.----Remember that, whether we think of it or not, we muſt all appear before the Judgment Seat of CHRIST, where Miniſters muſt give a ſtrict Account of the Doctrine they have deliver'd, and you as ſtrict a one, how you have improved under it.----And, good GOD! how will you be able to ſtand at the Bar of an angry, Sin-avenging Judge, and ſee ſo many Diſcourſes you have deſpiſed, ſo many Miniſters, who once long'd and labour'd for the Salvation of your precious and immortal Souls, brought out as ſo many ſwift Witneſſes againſt you?----Will it be ſufficient then, think you, to alledge, that you went to hear them only out of Curioſity---- to paſs away an idle Hour,----to admire the Oratory, or ridicule the Simplicity of the Preacher? ---- No, GOD will then let you know, that you ought to have come out of better Principles; that every Sermon has been put down to your Account, and that you muſt then be juſtly puniſhed for not improving by them.

But fear not, you little Flock, who with Meekneſs receive the ingrafted Word, and bring forth the peaceable Fruits of Righteouſneſs; for it ſhall not be ſo with you.----No, you will be your Miniſter's Joy, and their Crown of Rejoycing in the Day of our LORD JESUS. And they will preſent you in a holy Triumph faultleſs and unblameable to our

common Redeemer, ſaying, *Behold us, O Lord, and the Children which Thou haſt given us.*

But ſtill take you Heed how you hear. For upon your improving the Grace you have, more ſhall be given, and you ſhall have abundance. For He is faithful that has promiſed, who alſo will do it. Nay, GOD from out of *Sion* ſhall ſo bleſs you, that every Sermon you hear ſhall communicate to you afreſh Supply of ſpiritual Knowledge. The Word of GOD ſhall dwell in you richly; you ſhall go on from Strength to Strength, from one Degree of Grace unto another, 'till being grown up to be perfect Men in CHRIST JESUS, and filled with all the Fulneſs of GOD, you ſhall be tranſlated by Death to ſee Him as He is, and to ſing Praiſe before his Throne with Angels and Archangels, Cherubims and Seraphims, and the general Aſſembly of the Firſt-born, whoſe Names are written in Heaven, for ever and ever,

Which GOD, *&c.*